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A SIKH
In
GREECE

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Publisher's Note

I read this write-up once, twice, thrice and more in 1984. Everytime, it gave me new information and emotions. The article motivates the reader to be a true Sikh and a scholar of repute.

Dr. Brijpal Singh was one of the five Asians to be awarded doctoral study scholarship by the State Scholarship Foundation of the Government of Greece in 1976-77. He was in Athens from1977-80. He was awarded the Ph.D degree by the Athens School of Economics and Business Sciences in 1980 with a special remarks "Very good." Dr. Brijpal Singh also worked as Reader in Economics at the Punjabi University, Patiala. Presently he is Professor of Economics at Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie.

The present write up is a reprint from The Sikh Review, (Sept - Oct 1978). It was also published in Sikh Courier (London) and by Guru Nanak Dev Mission, Patiala as their tract no.-248. Late S.Narain Singh, Secretary of the Mission, observed in preface of the tract as-

"God's grace is manifest in many ways. One of the best examples of this grace is that He makes one go towards the Sikh path-the Sikh way of Life. Dr. Brijpal Singh is one of those blessed persons on whom this sikh grace is bestowed. He tried to be and aims to be a Sikh. Nothing more can be said of a man."

Sahit Te Parkashan Vibhag feels pleasure in publishing this write-up. Though it is a subsidised publication but any body can ask for a free copy. We will be pleased to send and print this, as many times, as it is required.

General Secretary,
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A SIKH IN GREECE

" Are you from Sudan ?" asks the conductor of the tram (or trolly as the Greeks call it) as I sit down in a seat next to him. I say 'no'. He suggests 'Somalia'. I repeat 'no'. Both of us are amused and to enjoy the fun, I refuse to tell him my country until he names half a dozen less-known countries from Arabia and Africa. He smiles the defeat. And as I utter the word 'India', he gives out a big breath, 'ah'. He had least expected such a well known country.

Then he turns his head immediately to his job of issuing tickets. At the next respite he beckons me with his friendly head gesture and asks, 'you are Buddhist ? My 'no' makes him curious still and he suggests such religions as Brahmanism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism etc. in turn until his glossary of religious sects of world is exhausted.

He gasps his defeat and his eyes wide open, circle with astonishment when I tell him that I am a 'Sikh'.

No, he has never heard the word. He has never read it. He has never met a Sikh. And then I am compelled to explain what Sikhism is; what it stands for, to a small group

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who has gathered round us by now. Of course, it was to all of them Greek in Greece.

Such incidents occur now, frequently as I walk in the busy avenues, visit offices, libraries or even the crowded department stores in the course of my ordinary business of life. I have been in Athens now for the last eleven months or so on a Greek Government scholarship for doctoral research. My topic of research is 'Tourism and Greek Balance of payments'. I have to visit libraries and offices as a part of collection of data and information on this topic.

My professors, two specimens of the finest among Greeks, had told me, rather warned me, that to collect statistics in the field would be the most difficult task in Greece, not only because of the language problem but also because research traditions of ancient Greece are not somehow grounded in the grass-roots of the modern public and private offices. What has come to me as a pleasant surprise, was that, My Sikh form and exterior was my greatest asset in this respect.

The moment I enter office, the receptionist noticing my Turban and beard gets herself interested in me. It becomes easy to get to the person concerned. Here again I am asked first of all, to explain religion, my religious beliefs, the state of politics and economy in India and so on.

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The discussion makes the person friendly and my formal work proceeds more smoothly.

Greeks have the ages-old tradition of a thirst for knowledge. Distance of India from Greece running into thousands of miles and its ancient culture and civilization lend charm to them. My religion and its form prompts them to ask. Even otherwise, Greece is a fair good exception in the whole of Europe. Here the foreigner feels at home. Racial feelings are non-existent. Africans mix up freely with the local population. Greeks take the initiative in talking to the foreigners. And when a Sikh presents himself as a Sikh, they naturally feel unusually intrested. A Sikh is a foreigner beyond doubt, indeed he is hundred percent a foreigner.

Fortunately or unfortunately, it seems, I am the only Sikh living in Athens; may be in Greece. Athens is the birth-place of democracy and European civilization. But modern Athens is a highly urbanized city like any other European capital. In some respects it is unique. Almost 25-30 percent of the total population of Greece lives in the Greater Athens alone. With a population of about 25 lakh people, the city has some 5 lakh cars running on roads in addition to about 50,000 taxies. More than 40 lakh tourists visit this country every year; almost all of them come to Athens alone. Any foreigner is absorbed in this vast ocean of humanity, but

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not a Sikh. Thanks to our Gurus, he is spotted at once. And he is rather more welcome.

Greek economy is heavily dependent on tourist receipts and Greeks realize it quite well. The government has a well-executed tourist policy. Even by ancient culture Greeks are very hospitable and extrovert people. A Sikh should have an easy time in maintaining his religion. Why am I the only Sikh seen here?

After a stay of about eleven months I have come to know that there are hundreds of my brothren here but they have all become shaven. I have met dozens of them by now. To be true, they have met me; invariably they call me from a little distance in sweet Punjabi tone, "Sat Sri Akal Ji." I am so pleased. But it is distressing to note that not even one of them has kept up his form. I always ask them, "why so ? Do they face any problem from the government, industry or people if they keep the hair ?"

No, surely, there is no such problem and they do agree with me on that. They are, however, mostly illegal entrants to this country and almost all of them are illegal residents. They want to conceal their identity for their deeds.

Most of them come here attracted by the higher wages etc. Unscrupulous travel agents first lure them and then 'throw' them some how in the country. They manage to

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continue to live here with the help of old comrades. Most of them work on ships as low-class unskilled crewmen. Because of inflation, scarcity of this type of labour and the psychological temperament of all of us to convert all money in our currency, they feel happy to find such work on ships. Visa and resident permits are not required on high seas. They can save some money and send home as well. So the parents are made to believe that they are earning 'decent' salaries and living in *'phoren'*. Shipping companies welcome the cheap labour supplied by India and Pakistan as long as they do not create problems of law and order.

As comparative Greek labour is not available, shipping companies have to face the opposition of international unions. In fact, everything seems to be in the knowledge of the government here as well. They simply tolerate in their own economic interest. The fair name of my country is certainly blemished. The name of my religion is not, because they dare not keep their religion. They dare not declare who they are. They are not Sikhs. If they want to indulge in misdeeds they have to conceal it. In order to conceal they forsake the religion which is so open, so conspicuous that one has always to have an insignia, something like a flag on the very face and the head. Thus **I have realized the value of Sikhism, its form and content, often with tears flowing down my eyes.**

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At first I felt sorry that these brothern of mine, who were my own brothers born of one father-Guru Gobind Singh, have forsaken this religion. But why do I feel that way. I reasoned with myself. Because the number of Sikhs has got reduced by some few hundreds or even thousands?

Ah! our great Guru knew how an ordinary Sikh would feel about it. So he made compulsory an exterior form of Sikhism, which only a person with a very deep conviction to his content could adopt and maintain. Any one with a superficial belief in the basic tenets of Sikhism would be the first to question its form.

To a modern man whose philosophy of life has become to lead a comfortable and 'luxurious' life, this form would seem to be too difficult, almost an uneasy burden, but one who is fired with truth, one who has realised the meaning of life and wants to live a good, dutiful and purposeful life beyond the life of goods and commodities alone and one who seeks to live as the Gurus ordained us to live, that person would find this exterior form of Sikhism as the content of this great religion. Indeed the more one reflects the more one realizes that this form is actually, truly and basically a part of the content of Sikh way of life.

Have I conquered 'Haumai' (ego) if I want to appear as most others are according to the current concepts of beauty, smartness and easy life? (Are these not relative to time, place and even the current economic power of an

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alien culture?) Have I understood the concept of 'Hukam' if I object to one part (the so-called exterior aspect) of Sikhism but give my lip-sympathy to the other ?

Thus realizing, I feel happy that those who did not believe in the basics of Sikhism but kept its form just by tradition or only at the behest of their social group, cannot even keep the form of my religion when they want to lead the loose life of crime, illegal existence and of extramarital sex and wine. They may be 'enjoying' the 'pleasure' for some moments, I do not know, but I do know, and most of them agree with me voluntarily, that they have ruined permanently their health and happiness.

So I realize here that in order to be a true Sikh you have to be a good citizen. Which country would object to have such residents? Sikh as a Sikh, is more welcome and lives happier in foreign countries.

That is not to say that one does not face 'problems.' There are two things to the question. We have to define the word 'problem' first. If others look at me with curiosity and a question-mark, it is problem. I can rest to such a situation in two ways. One is that I feel embarrassed and depressed because of these looks. It becomes problem then. The other way to take these looks is as an opportunity for self-expression and a step towards social introduction. The same strange looks are not a problem but an asset now.

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'Problem' after all, is my reaction towards events -often it may be just my psychological fear. At least I have never felt this sort of problem or fear. I often wave my hand in a friendly gesture to the curious eyes and get in return beaming smiles while hands are waved back more warmly in reply. And this is true in the case of little children, young boys and old people alike.

Of course, in the course of an actual discussion one has to be bold, forth-right and without any sense of inferiority what so ever. A lady asked me at a shop, "Why do you keep hair ? It must be too hot with them during summer, especially in India."

I said , "Why don't you replace your skirt with mini-shorts as young girls do in America ? Athens is surely hotter than New York." She thought for a few moments and then said " Why should I remove my skirt ? It is a part of my dress. And it is my national custum. And I do not feel as 'hot' (with a pun, by emphasis as Americans do)".

"I replied so calmly", my dear sister, if you have the rightful claim to keep a part of your dress, have I not to keep a part of my being ? And I do not keep hair, they are there. Just as are my eyes and nose. If you do not feel 'too hot' to cast off a part of your traditional dress, why should you expect me to feel ' too hot' to remove a part of my body and because others have removed this part for fashion or

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convenience. It has been an exclusive outer sign of my religion. And if you have time and patience to study, you shall know that the hair for us are much more than a dress-a symbol."

The other aspect of the 'problem' is a physical difficulty in finding a job or adjusting to the environment of law and common regulations in a land where ignorance may be on the other side. This is a situation where preseverance is tested for some time. But I faithfully believe that after the initial testing period, the Guru helps with his divine grace.

God save me from egotism, but I did have one such experience. Because of an assured four year scholarship I did not have to face the problem of finding a job. But my keeping of *'Kirpan'* is legally objectionable here. I was warned about it by some Greek friends here within a few weeks of my arrival. My people at home, to my great dismay, suggested from Punjab that I need not be 'very rigid' and 'fanatic' about it. I asked the Indian counsellor (who happened to be a Greek) to give me a certificate that *'Kirpan'* is a neccessary symbol of my religion. Neither he knew nor did understand. He tried to argue a little by saying what would it matter if I did not keep it.

It took me two minutes to make him act. I said that the law allows freedom to adopt the religion of one's choice.

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Nobody and no law has the power to question the necessity of the beliefs of another religion.

He did forward my application to the Indian Embassy at Belgrade where from by the grace of God a certificate did arrive in due course. Then I met the Chief of Alien Police, Athens, after one of my professors had helpfully introduced me to him on telephone. The chief said that whatever the particular case the law here would not allow one to go about with the *'gatra'* and *'Kirpan'*.

My face probably conveyed my feelings of exhasperation.

He added, "What would you do now ?"

I had, in fact, already made up my mind and I had it conveyed to my people at home. So I promptly said,"I shall take the first plane available to go home." He was visibly surprised. He tried to dissuade me, "Do you know that you are one of the five persons selected for this international scholarship meant for all Asian countries and for all subjects : Are you refusing the scholarship ?"

I replied a little more firmly, "I am rejecting the scholarship as well as the country."

He thought for a few seconds. Then there were telephonic consultations with some other authorities.

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He smiled at last. "We do not want to lose a research scholar especially the one like you. You shall continue to have the way you wish and I have taken the personal responsibility against any misuse of your weapon."

Feeling greatly relieved I thanked him profusely. Then I showed him my 'Kara' and explained that I am already under the love shackles of my Guru and cannot misuse my weapon, body or mind.

He felt pleased. The man promised to be my friend here as long as I stay.

But a pain lurks within me. Why I have to be treated as an exception ? It reminds me of a similar incident in Rajasthan State Assembly where I was disallowed at first to sit in the visitors' gallery because of my *'Kirpan'*, even though I was a gazetted officer of the same state govt. Later at the personal discretion of the Speaker I was admitted as an 'exception'. I reflect now and believe that one becomes 'exception' and a difficult case once, because most of the times we bend too easily for personal convenience.

Sometimes there are pleasent surprises I was to go through a medical examination in a state hospital. As I entered the room the doctor-on-duty shot at me a question.

"Are you a Sikh?"

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He had recently attended an international conference in India and visited Golden Temple, where Sikhism was explained to him. He would not believe me untill he had physically seen and counted himself my all the five *'Kakkars'*. He then showed the same to a group of doctors and explained to them their symbolical value.

I have not yet been to any other European country. My teacher in a college at Chandigarh, where I helped him in translating 'Pinnochio' into Punjabi had then fired my imagination to go to Italy. My Guru has wished me in Greece. May be Greece is an exception. I do not know. I have my wishes and plans to visit some East European countries. These are the countries where Sikhs are rarely known or seen.

Ah ! but Grace of God is every where .....even there where He is not believed in general.

The young here, as elsewhere, are not religious minded. For them socialism seems to be the future hope of just society. I live in a hostel with these young people. My daily prayers and reading from Sri Guru Granth Sahib within the hostel room (I had taken care in India that my Guru accompanies me) along with my some ideas on national economic organisation perplex them.

When I do explain at length they agree that Sikhism

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is a *"Kale thriskeia"* i.e. a good religion.

On the other hand a brother-like Muslim friend of mine introducted me once to another person; for my purpose he is a Muslim. A staunch orthodox Christian friend, who is going to become a priest in a couple of months, introduced my religion to another priest as, "it is very similar, indeed very near to our own religion". Sikhism is known in the circle where I live now.

But a deep sigh within me pricks constantly. I realize my failings too well. Let me express it in a few words of prayer,

"Guru Ji, make me really live the
life of a true Sikh
till my last breath
.....the life that
I am posing under the
compulsions of being
helpless in a foreign land".

- Brij Pal Singh
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The Mission is a non-profit organisation. None of its workers or executive members is a paid employee. Accordingly the booklets are made available for free distribution at mere cost price. Members are the Mission get these free of charge.

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